



PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF ASSAM'S INDIGENOUS SILK INDUSTRY

Juri Phukan

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Dibru College

ABSTRACT

Assam silk industry has abode self-importance in the socio-economic and cultural life of Assamese people. It has attained global recognition and accreditation because of its uniqueness, beauty, artistic work. Assam is the only place in the world which produces all four types of natural silk i.e. Golden Muga, White Pat (Mulberry), Warm Eri and Tasar. Rearing of Silk worm and weaving silk products are playing an important role in the economic development of large section of population of the state. It is practiced in 9935 villages at present and provides employment to 3.19 lakh families of the State. Assam's silk industry holds immense potential to drive economic growth and generate employment while safeguarding the state's unique cultural heritage. Achieving this potential requires dedicated efforts, collaboration, and innovative strategies from all stakeholders to overcome challenges and harness opportunities for sustainable development. By enhancing production, improving quality, and embracing eco-friendly practices, the silk industry in Assam can emerge as a vital economic force in the region. The demand for Assam silk is very high domestic market as well as outside of Assam. Despite the high demand, Assam silk industry faces many problems. Therefore, the paper attempts to study various problems faced by Assam silk industry and offer some relevant suggestions to deal with the problems

KEYWORDS: Assam Silk, Economic Development, Employment

INTRODUCTION

Silk, often referred to as the "Golden Fibre" is a central pillar of textiles industry, especially in rural and semi urban areas, earning it the Title "Queen of Textiles" The silk industry, one of the oldest agro-based industries globally, combines the artistry and science of sericulture, or the rearing of silkworms, to produce luxurious silk fibers. This intricate process spans centuries, originating in ancient civilizations, particularly in China, where the craft was developed and perfected before spreading worldwide. Silk industry is a major labour-intensive cottage industry in Assam that has been practiced from the time of immemorial and providing gainful occupation to around 3.19 lakh families in rural and semi-urban areas of Assam. Assam produces all the four varieties of natural silk i.e eri ,muga, mulberry and tussar. The natural silk eri and muga are indigenous origin and Assam is famous for these two silk varieties .Assam is monopoly producer of muga , the "golden silk", and produces as more than 97% of muga has achieved the right of geographical indication for muga silk (Economic survey of Assam 2017-18). The demand for Assam silk is very high domestic market as well as outside of Assam. It is reported that India is the world's second producer of raw silk and largest consumer of raw silk and fabrics (source: Directorate of Sericulture and DGCIS, Kolkata) .The market for silk in India is driven by both exports and a very strong domestic demand. Fabrics made up of silk are quite popular in the domestic market during ceremonies, religious rituals, weddings, festivals, etc. Despite the high demand, Assam silk industry faces many problems. Therefore, the paper attempts to study various prospects and problems of this indigenous silk industry of Assam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bharathi .D (2016) in his study finds silk production as industrial activity and best suitable to the educated youth to produce quality silk and earn their comfortable livelihood and to provide employment to others.

Barmon, S (2012) studies the challenge of sericulture in Assam and suggests a comprehensive and integrated approach to promote it. According to him, sericulture industry has potential to significantly contribute to the state's economy and employment generation.

Khosla & et.al studies the three significant indigenous Assamese Industries i.e. ferry industry of Guwahati, the firecracker industry of Barpeta, Silk industry of Sualkuchi. The authors find that despite the significant size the silk industry of Assam urgently needs intervention, as many workers are dissatisfied with their earnings. To make Sulakuchi a strong competition to Banaras, substantial government action is needed to organize and streamline production, weaving and sales. Without this support, the industry will be in risks and remain inefficient and stagnant.

Objective of the paper:

- The prospects and prevailing problems of Assam silk industry.

METHODOLOGY

The study is an analytical one and based on secondary sources of data collected from different journals and Economic survey of Assam 2022-23 and Directorate of Sericulture and DGCIS, Kolkata.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assam is renowned for its production of four distinctive types of silk: mulberry, eri, muga, and oak tasar. Each type possesses unique characteristics and properties, contributing to their high value and desirability in various applications. Silk industry in Assam is a labor-intensive industry that significantly contributes to employment, income generation, rural development, and cultural heritage. It provides direct employment to over 2.6 lakh families, mostly small farmers and weavers, with many women involved across all stages, from silkworm rearing to

weaving, fostering economic empowerment. The income from sericulture often surpasses traditional agriculture, with products like muga silk fetching premium prices due to high demand. This industry supports rural infrastructure and allied sectors, helping reduce rural-urban migration. Additionally, sericulture holds deep cultural significance, with muga and eri silks woven into traditional attire like the mekhela chador and used in religious and ceremonial events, making it a symbol of Assamese identity and heritage.

Items	Unit	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Sericulture Villages	Nos	11411	11281	11281	9935	8726	8726	8642	8640	8627	8722
No. of families engaged	Nos	282073	652406	496901	319405	310582	307877	309530	331857	299936	301176
Area under silkworm foodplants	Hect	33790	15417	11434	15983	11585	11537	43608	47113.6	44278.5	44412.154
Eri	Hect	15796	6601	5510	7176	5936	27000	30319.5	33252.7	29096	29116.034
Muga	Hect	10371	5995	4383	5931.58	4369	8600	10762.5	12891	12557	12661.64
Mulberry	Hect	7623	2821	1541	2875	1280	2370	2526.34	2569.9	2624	2634.48
YIELD OF COCOONS											
Eri –cut cocoons	MT	3182	3050	3317	4350.58	6300	6133	6311	6574	6769.96	6847.9
Muga cocoons	Lakh Nos	6361	6528	6864	6480	7865	10496	9865	9533	10511.6	10439.94
Mulberry reeling cocoons	MT	340.5	268	328	439.05	576	597	584.89	234.84	217.52	298.44
Production of silk yarn	MT	2700	2497.4	2712.8	3647.5	4866.5	5009.8	5314.8	5549.6	5655.95	5721.199
Eri raw silk	MT	2545.6	2345	2555	3468.25	4650	4733	5048.8	5275.74	5420	5487.815
Muga raw silk	MT	127.2	126	127	129.6	156.96	193.22	197.29	240.46	210.495	211.27
Mulberry raw silk	MT	27.24	26.4	31.02	49.64	59.5	52	68.7	33.4	24.6	22.114

Source: Directorate of Sericulture, Assam

Table: 1: Sericulture activities in Assam

Assam silk is highly demanded in both domestic and national market due to its elegant look and traditional values. Despite the high demand, Assam silk producers face many problems including low productivity due to traditional practices, insufficient infrastructure for rearing and processing, and a lack of quality planting material, which affects silk yield. Inadequate extension services and frequent pest and disease infestations further limit productivity, while climate change poses additional risks with extreme weather events impacting silkworms and host plants. Environmental concerns related to pesticide use and insufficient research and development support also hinder growth, highlighting the need for improved infrastructure, sustainable practices, and investment in research to enhance the industry's resilience and productivity.

The problem is supply sided. The growth of production of Assam silk is slow to fulfill its growing demand. In 2011-12

India had demanded around 26000 MT of silk yarns, against which the country produced around 18000 MT. Assam produced only 1187.42 MT of silk yarns in the same year (Directorate of Sericulture and DGCIS, Kolkata). This implies the huge gap between demand and supply of Assam silk yarns.

ITEM	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Production of silk yarns (in MT)	935.66	1187.42	2068.0	2700.04	2497.40	2712.80	3647.49	5028.84	5314.79	5549.61	5655.1	5721.056
Eri raw silk	810.98	1061.61	1934.0	2545.6	2345.0	2555.00	3468.25	4764.52	5048.8	5275.74	5420	5487.815
Muga raw silk	113.28	114.56	109.0	127.2	126.0	127	129.60	194.12	197.29	240.46	210.50	211.127
Mulberry raw silk	11.4	11.25	25.0	27.24	26.4	31.02	49.64	70.20	68.70	33.41	24.60	22.114

Source: Directorate of Sericulture Assam, 2022-23

Table 2: Production of Raw Silk/ Yarn in Assam (in MT)

The table: 2, shows that growth of production of Assam silk yarns is not sufficient as compared to market demand. The table shows, the total silk yarn production increases at a very slow rate. The production of mulberry silk is decreasing at a significant rate. At present Silk worm rearing specially muga silk worm rearing is suffering due to high climate pollution, extreme temperature and continuous rearing under domestic nature. So, India imports huge amount of silk yarns from China, Japan to meet the shortage. As these imported silk yarns are cheaper than Assam silk, so they easily occupy its market. The quantity and value of raw silk imported during XI Plan and during the first 4 years of XII Plan and for the year 2016-17 (upto August-2016) are given below on table 1.b.

Year	Quantity	Value (Rs. In Crores)
XI Plan 2011-12	5683	1111.53
XI Plan 2012-13	4959	1238.56
2013-14	3260	896.44
2014-15	3489	970.82
2015-16	3529	1006.16
2016-17*(p)	1586	438.23

Source: DGCIIS, Kolkata.

* Upto Aug-2016, (p) provisional

Table 3: The quantity and value of raw silk imported during XI Plan and during the first 4 years of XII Plan

The table 3 depicts that India imports huge amount of raw silk to meet the shortage and it requires crores of rupees. It indicates that Assam silk has great scope to occupy the market by increasing its production.

Another problem of Assam silk industry is duplication and ignorance of buyers. It is seen that most of the buyers have not basic knowledge about quality of Assam silk. By taking advantage of this situation some traders sell duplicate silk for example Vanarashi silk as Assam silk at a lower price and earns huge profit. This phenomenon hurts both buyers and weavers and deforms Assam silk culture. In 2013, the weavers of "Sualkuchi" the silk city protested violently against sale of Vanarashi silk by the wholesalers to protect their craft and livelihood.

Assam is the only place in the world which produces all four types of indigenous silk- golden muga, mulberry silk, warm eri and Tasar. First and foremost, the production of Assam silk has to increase to match the growing demand. The production of Assam silk can be increased by introducing high yielding

mulberry varieties, Tasar reeling technology package, developed pest management measures against various pests of mulberry and silk worm. The menace imported inferior quality silk will be automatically curbed with the increase of supply of Assam silk. Recently, the Department of Sericulture of Assam has proposed to release some muga silk worm in wild plantation in the Assam-Meghalaya border area near Boko in collaboration with State Forest Department to make capable the silk worm to regain its wild nature and strength to survive with the present topography. The problem of duplication of Assam silk may be restrained by if the government establishes some strict taxation norms on the entry of inferior quality silk. In order to safeguard the interest of the domestic silk industry against the cheap imports, a petition was filed by Central Silk Board with Directorate General of Antidumping & Allied Duties (DGAD) on behalf of various silk reelers Associations along with the State Governments of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh & Tamil Nadu for imposition of antidumping duty on raw silk imported from China. Considering the merits of the case, the antidumping duty was imposed with a reference price of US\$ 37.32 per Kg. and the same was in force till January-2014. The current antidumping declaration is expected to stabilize the price of raw silk in domestic market. Central Silk Board is popularizing "Silk Mark", for purity of silk products through the Silk Mark Organization of India (SMOI). "Silk Mark", an assurance label, protects the interests of the consumers from the traders selling spurious products in the name of pure silk. Silk Mark Expos are being organized exclusively for Silk Mark Authorized Users from across the country. The Expo is an ideal platform not only to popularize Silk Mark but also in bringing the manufacturers and the consumers under one platform for buying and selling of pure silk products. Substantial business for the participants is generated during this event. During the event massive awareness and publicity campaigns are carried out by the Silk Mark Organization of India. Silk is currently regarded as luxury thing in our economy and silk products are mostly sold based on its reputation not because of effective market strategies.

The Central Silk Board (CSB) under the Ministry of Textiles, India, supports Assam's silk industry through various schemes, including the Cluster Promotion Programme for Handlooms, which aids in handloom cluster development through infrastructure, skills, and marketing support. The Integrated Sericulture Development Project enhances silk quality and productivity via host plant nurseries, seed production, and processing facilities. Additionally, the Muga Silk and Eri Silk

Development Schemes promote muga and eri silk production with financial aid for plantations, rearing houses, and processing units.

The Assam Government promotes sericulture through several schemes, including the Chief Minister's Sericulture Development Scheme, which offers financial support for mulberry, eri, and muga plantations. The Assam Silk Outreach Mission supports silk production, processing, marketing, and branding. Additionally, the Assam Silk Industry Development Scheme funds reeling, spinning, weaving, and processing units, while the Sericulture Training and Demonstration Scheme provides training to improve sericulture practices among farmers, reelers, and weavers.

CONCLUSION

The natural silk industry of Assam is an indispensable part of the people of Assam, their culture and tradition. Assam's silk industry has the potential to significantly boost the state's economy and create substantial employment opportunities, while preserving its rich cultural heritage and traditional craftsmanship. For sustainable growth, the silk industry in Assam requires collaborative efforts from all stakeholders, along with the adoption of innovative, eco-friendly practices to ensure its long-term development and success. In spite of having a tradition of silk production and many govt. schemes, in the market of Assam silk, the supply is significantly less compared to demand which is the root cause of the problems of Assam silk market. Market related problems like threat of cheap imported yarns, traders selling garments made out of low priced blended yarns in the name of pure Assam silk etc. are depriving and demoralizing people who are honest and engaged in production, weaving and trading of Assam silk. So, it can be expected that promotion of marketing of indigenous Assam silk products and continuous increase of disposable income and improved standard of living will increase the consumption of silk fabrics in the nation.

REFERENCES

1. Baishya, P., "The Silk Industry of Assam", Spectrum Publication, New Delhi, 2003.
2. Baruah, Smannoy, "Assam Silk Market: Problems and Probable Solutions", International Journal of Innovation Research in Science Engineering and Technology, Vol.5, Issue 7, July 2016, ISSN (Online): 2319-8753.
3. Bharathi. D, (2016) "Sericulture Industry in India- A source of employment generation."International Journal of advanced engineering research and science (IJAERS), International Journal of Advanced Engineering Research and Science, ISSN-2349-6495.
4. Bormon. S, (2012) "Sericulture Industry in Assam: A review." IJFANS, ISSN: 23191775. Vol: 11.
5. Yaseen, Syed , " Indian Sericulture Industry: Its Importance, Problems and Prospects" , Acne Intellects International Journal of Research in Management, Vol-2,No-2, April-2013, ISSN-2320-2939(Print),ISSN- 2320-2793(Online).
6. Economic Survey of Assam. 2017-18.